

Gluttons for Grace

12/5/2021

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Mattia Preti, Saint John the Baptist Preaching

Preaching on:

Luke 3:1–18

I know what you're probably thinking. Pastor Jeff's pulled the old bait-and-switch on us again. It's the season of Advent and we're supposed to be journeying toward the manger, where our hearts can be at peace, and where there's a sweet little miracle baby waiting to cuddle and save us. "This way to Bethlehem! Follow me!" says Pastor Jeff, and then we turn a corner and BAM! There's this hairy, scary wild man coming at us like a junkyard dog, barking about sin and repentance. You know I think he called me a snake? And to top it all off, it looks like he's grabbing people and drowning them in Jordan! Can this really be the way "home to the manger?" Can John and all his judgment really get us to Jesus?

It is strange, but I'm not trying to trick you. In fact, all four gospel writers agree that to get Jesus you've got to go through John. And every year, the lectionary brings us John the Baptist on the second Sunday of Advent. Yes, I'll admit, he is definitely intimidating and intense, but John meets us here at the beginning for a reason.

John is frightening at first blush. But look closer and you see he's not a dog off its leash. He's not chasing after you or trying to scare you off. In fact, he goes as far away from other people as he can get—way out in the wilderness! And the people come to him! Now, why would they do that? Why would they hear his harsh words as an invitation?

I don't think of these people, who made the long trek out to see John the Baptist, as gluttons for punishment. I think they were just the people who more than anything else wanted to live a new kind of life. We've all felt something like that at some time in our lives. And these people were the people who had to do something about it. They needed to respond. And they understood that progress requires risk, that a better future requires the transformation of the past, and that transformation requires repentance. These were the people who needed grace, and they knew it. And they knew that a life stuck in guilt, and shame, and all those voices in your head telling you that you'll never be good enough is a life that has not yet met forgiveness, and true pardon can only ever be found on the other side of repentance.

Yeah, John is a bit judgy. I'll give you that. But those who know they need grace are those who have already met the harshest judgment of all—the judgment we lay on ourselves and the judgement that we lay on others, a judgment that rarely lets go of us, a judgment so small and so mean that it doesn't have the strength to ever achieve forgiveness. And with nowhere to go, that judgment festers in us. It metastasizes into despair and all the unhealthy behaviors that we invent to deal with despair—blaming, yelling, hitting, gambling, cutting, binging, purging, hurting, drinking, drugging, buying, bragging, using.

And so John set up shop by the Jordan not to convince us that we're sinners or to make us feel bad,

but to convince us that we can be forgiven, and to prepare the way for the one who would build a Church out of the most imperfect characters you've ever met. Take a look around.

Some years ago, I had a congregant—let's call him "Will." Will was a public-school teacher and an addict in recovery who had been working through the 12 steps for a few years. And Will came to me one day and said this: "When I was using Meth, there were some days that I went into work to teach dangerously exhausted from not sleeping, and sometimes I even went in while I was still high. I'm finally ready for the 9th step. I'm making amends to everybody I've harmed by using. And so at the end of the day on Friday I've got an appointment to meet with my boss. I'm going to tell her that I'm in recovery, that I was addicted to meth, that I came in to teach high, that I did a poor job of teaching, that I put students at risk, and that I lied to her about it.

"Some of my friends and family, and my union rep, are telling me that this will be the biggest mistake of my life. But I can't believe that. The biggest mistake of my life was using and lying to everyone about it—even to myself, and to God. This is the only way forward for me in my recovery journey. And I don't know if they're going to fire me, arrest me, or what they're going to do. But I'm going into work on Friday to finally tell the truth and to hold myself accountable. Pastor Jeff, will you please pray for me?"

Woah! Just retelling the story, gets my adrenaline going again. What a crucible! What a test to put yourself through, right? Now, this story could cause some confusion because most of us do not have a healthy relationship to the concept or to the practice of repentance. So, I need to say right from the get-go that the point of this story is not that if you're really doing repentance right it should feel terrible and, whenever you do it, it should threaten to blow up your whole life. That's not what Will's story is about.

What I learned from Will about repentance, and what this story is about, is that one of the reasons that Will started using Meth and became an addict in the first place was because he felt like he was a no-good, worthless person. This was before repentance. What repentance showed him was that he was a regular person who had made some terrible mistakes. The problem wasn't Will, it was the mistakes Will made. And so to escape despair, and to secure a future in which Will was sure of his own inherent goodness and worthiness, he had to deal with his mistakes. And for Will, complete repentance, full honesty, and making amends meant finally being able to leave those mistakes behind him. So for Will, repentance was no longer something to be feared, but something worth a tremendous risk.

Now most of us, who have not undertaken the spiritual journey of the 12 steps, we're not interested in repentance because we think that we can escape the past by ignoring it or hiding it or burying it. But that is the path to despair, and shame, and guilt, and all kinds of unhealthy behaviors that the unforgiven engage in to dull the pain of being stuck in the past.

But Will showed me that repentance is like spiritual chemotherapy—intimidating, intense, certainly not

without risks, but for those fighting for their lives against the disease of guilt, or for those looking to experience the grace of forgiveness and a future freed from the shackles of the past, repentance is powerful medicine.

So, repentance is not realizing that you're a "bad" person in order to become a more miserable person. Forget that! And this is like the big, big, hoping-to-blow-your-mind shift in thinking here: Repentance, when you do it right, is not all about you—the totally depraved sinner, the hopeless addict, the worthless screwup. Repentance means taking a step away from the judgmental story that I'm telling about myself and taking a step towards the story that God is telling about me. The character of repentance is not shaped by how bad you are. It is shaped by how good God is!

I know you all want to know what happened to Will. He didn't get arrested and he didn't get fired. A happy ending. And do you want to know what happened to John the Baptist? After all those years of sacrifice and scarcity out in the wilderness, after all those years of shouting and judging, after all those years of working to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord? One day, Jesus showed up, and turned his whole life upside down—with grace. One day Jesus showed up with a grace so good, it even surprised John. May Jesus show up and surprise you too on your journey to Christmas.